Deadly Stalemate in Yemen

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The contestants in Yemen's war are locked in a deadly stalemate that is dragging the country into a humanitarian nightmare. The damage incurred by the war on Yemen's physical infrastructure and social fabric will take a long time to repair, even in the event of a political settlement. The war has hardened the positions of the various contestants and deepened Yemen's political and social divides. Yemen will likely remain unstable and effectively divided for some time despite efforts to reunify the country. In the northern highlands of Yemen, the Houthi organization and forces loyal to former president Ali Abdallah Saleh remain firmly rooted despite daily bombardment by the Saudi Air Force and the lack of financial resources to pay even military salaries. In the east and south is a Saudi-backed coalition of groups that oppose the Houthi and Saleh but that can agree on little else. Neither side is capable of winning the military contest nor, it seems, of successfully negotiating a settlement.

The Contestants: The Houthi

Entrenched in the western highlands are the Houthi organization and Yemeni strongman, Ali Abdallah Saleh. Saleh ruled Yemen from 1978 until 2011, when he resigned under pressure from domestic protests and an international community that was concerned about Yemen's fragility. The Houthi organization is a newcomer to the pinnacles of power in Yemen, and its political immaturity is clear in its abusive tactics and crude political moves. Houthis and Saleh were deadly enemies during the 2000s (Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells 2010), but shared strategic interests united the former enemies in an alliance of convenience in 2014 (Salisbury 2016, p22). For Saleh, the war is a means to regain power by destroying the Saudi backed transitional government that replaced him. For the Houthi leadership, the war is an ill-fated attempt to rebuild the Yemeni state under Houthi dominance.

The Houthi organization's roots lie in a youth religious movement, the Believing Youth, which was formed around 1990. The Believing Youth sought to modernize Zaydism, a strain of Shia Islam, in order to compete with the new strains of Sunni Islam such as Salafism and the Muslim Brotherhood that were spreading in the traditionally Zaydi parts of northern Yemen (Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells 2010). Thus, commentators describe the Houthi as a Zaydi revival movement.

However, the Houthi movement was transformed by Hussein al-Houthi in the early 2000s into a political group by adopting a version of Ayatollah Khomeini's vision of Shia leadership of a Muslim rebellion against American power in the Middle East. Hussein al-Houthi organized demonstrations against the regime of Ali Abdallah Saleh in the heated period of the American invasion of Iraq. Saleh was famous for his trip to Washington in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, in which he reassured Washington that his regime was firmly allied with the US in the war on terror (Henderson 2010). Hussein's demonstrations irritated Saleh, and he ordered Hussein's arrest. Hussein's followers defended him against Saleh's security forces, and a small war broke out (Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells 2010).

Between 2004 and 2010, six wars flared between the Yemeni military and the Houthi organization, during which the Houthi organization transformed itself from a political group into an insurgency rooted in popular resentment of the Saleh regime in the far north of Yemen. The Houthi leadership worked with tribal leaders and villages to overthrow the Saleh regime's allies in the north (Brandt 2014).

With the fall of Saleh's regime in 2011, the Houthi joined the rest of Yemeni society in the National Dialogue

Conference to chart a future free of the ills of the Saleh regime (Republic of Yemen 2013). However, after the interim government of President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi stalled in early 2014, the Houthi organization shifted once again. This time, the Houthi organization transformed itself from an insurgency against an oppressive government in the north to a central broker of power in the national government.

Ali Abdallah Saleh

The Houthi organization allied with its former enemy, Ali Abadallah Saleh, to enter the capital and overthrow the transitional government of Hadi. Initially the Houthi wanted only a greater role in the Hadi government, but as the Houthi leadership tasted power, their inexperience led them to attempt to rule Yemen alone (United Nations 2014).

For Saleh, the Houthi organization provided a means to regain a seat of power in Sana'a. Saleh felt that his former allies, the Islah Party and Ali Muhsin in particular, had betrayed him in 2011. The Islah Party is Yemen's mainstream Islamist party but its constituents are a diverse set of actors, better described as politically conservative rather than religiously inspired. The main pillars of the party are leaders affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, and the al-Ahmar family's leadership of the Hashid tribal confederation. The First Armored Brigade, under the leadership of Ali Muhsin, constituted the military wing of the Islah party; his troops were known for their sympathies to Islamic politics. Ali Muhsin is a fellow clansman of Saleh's from the region of Sanhan, south of Sana'a. He came to power with Saleh and was always considered the second in command of the Saleh regime (International Crisis Group 2013).

During the Arab Spring, Ali Muhsin and the al-Ahmar family deserted Saleh, effectively splitting the inner core of Saleh's regime into two warring factions in Sana'a. Fearing Yemen's slide into uncontrollable chaos, the Saudis and the Gulf Cooperation Council helped broker a negotiated settlement between the various factions of Yemen's elite. Saleh stepped down in exchange for immunity for crimes committed during the Arab Spring and retention of his leadership role in Yemen's ruling party (United Nations 2013). A transition period under Saleh's vice president, Hadi, was to lead to new elections, but the Houthi intrusion in 2014 ended the Hadi government. For Saleh, the Houthi were a means to derail the transitional process and gain revenge against the Islah Party. The Houthi forces targeted the Islah Party, the al-Ahmar leadership of the Hashid tribal confederation, and Ali Muhsin's forces, because this coalition of actors strove to diminish the role of the traditional Zaydi families (Knutsen 2014). Thus, Saleh and the Houthi, former enemies, allied against a new common enemy—Islah.

The Opponents of the Houthi

In the south and east of Yemen is a diverse set of actors united only in their enmity to Saleh and the Houthis. In fact, these groups are not really united: accusations of treason fly between them daily, while the best adjectives to describe the southern and eastern groups are incompetent and corrupt. President Hadi is the erstwhile leader of the south and east, but he lives in Riyadh because he cannot even secure his own home, and few in the south and east actually support Hadi (Salisbury 2016, p. 2). Hadi returned to Aden only recently when the UN negotiator proposed a national reconciliation government that would exclude Hadi from power (Reuters 2016b).

The southern governorates of Aden, Lahj, and Dhalia are home to those that support secession and the reestablishment of an independent southern state. Yemen was divided during the Cold War into a Soviet backed south and Saudi and American backed north. In 1990 the two Yemen's united, but many southerners felt that the unification process was a northern takeover of the south rather than a merger. The alienation of southerners increased after a brief civil war in 1994. Southern militias were quick to fight the Houthi forces when they entered the south because southerners saw the Houthi as another northern invasion. Though a southerner himself, Hadi rejects southern secession, arguing instead that southern interests will be realized in a new federal state proposed in the new Yemeni constitution. Thus, the secessionists reject Hadi and his government because he supports Yemeni unity and is against southern aspirations for independence. The secessionists cooperate with the Hadi coalition, aided by the Saudi and Emirati military, economic, humanitarian support. However, the secessionists harbor deep suspicions of Hadi, his prime minister, bin Daghr, and especially Ali Muhsin, head of the eastern military operation and one of Hadi's many vice presidents.

In Abyan, Shabwa, and Hadhramawt governorates, al-Qaeda is a potent force, although it suffered a series of military defeats when Yemeni and Emirati forces threw al-Qaeda out of the port city of Mukulla in April of this year (Morell 2016). Al-Qaeda also suffers from the constant threat of American drones that have proven deadly accurate for al-Qaeda's leaders. Al-Qaeda is a disruptive element that contributes to the south's instability and political incoherence.

Hadhramis, those that live in Hadhramawt Governorate, generally share Aden's suspicion of northerners after bitter years under Saleh's regime, but Hadhramis also harbor suspicions of the former socialists that dominate Aden, Lahj, and Abyan. In addition, the south is the home Salafi groups, whom are both indigenous to the region and refugees from the north. The southern movement, Hirak, attempts to stitch all of these diverse groups into a political movement for southern independence, but the diversity of southern social groups prevents the emergence of any coherent leadership or organization (International Crisis Group 2011).

The eastern desert regions of Marib, that border Saudi Arabia, are politically much more coherent but far less populated. The Bedouin tribes are organized into a loose confederation supportive of the Islah Party, and Ali Muhsin commands a large army recruited from throughout Yemen and trained and equipped by Saudi Arabia. Hashem al-Ahmar of the old leadership of the Hashid tribal federation also plays a leading role in the Saudi trained army of the east. The southerners in particular distrust this eastern army because Ali Muhsin led Saleh's forces of repression against the south after the civil war of 1994. Although a southerner from Abyan, Hadi himself was a military commander in charge of Saleh forces that conquered the south in 1994, so southerners have plenty of reason to distrust the motives of the other members of the Hadi coalition.

The Saudis

The Saudis see Yemen as a potential threat, both as a strong state and as a failed state. As a strong state, a hostile Yemen threatens the Saudis. The Saudis spent the entire Cold War supporting the north against the communist south because the Saudis feared communism was a threat to their regime. Then, during the Yemeni civil war of 1994, the Saudi supported the communists in the south against Ali Abdallah Saleh in the north because Saleh was too close to Saddam Hussein. Saleh supported the Iraqi cause, or at least declined to join the American coalition against Iraq, in the Gulf War.

On the other hand, the Saudis also fear Yemen's descent into chaos. Yemen's poverty and instability could easily implode across the long desert border between the two countries. Finally, forces hostile to Saudi Arabia, such as al-Qaeda, find in Yemen a safe haven when the Yemeni state cannot control its territory.

In the current conflict, the Saudis fear a strong united Yemen allied with Iran, Saudi Arabia's regional rival (Reuters 2016a). The Houthi do have relations with Iran. Iranian ideology inspired Hussein al-Houthi and Houthi leaders have met with Iranian officials, Iraqis allied with Iran, and Lebanese representatives of Hezbollah. When the Houthi first took over Sana'a in early 2015, Iran and the Houthis concluded an agreement for regular air links and a large economic aid package (al-Jazeera 2015), but these plans were interrupted by the war. In the past year, American military ships intercepted small shipments of Iranian weapons headed for Yemen (Bergen 2016). However, the bulk of the weapons of the Houthi and Saleh are Yemeni. They do not need Iranian weapons. The Saleh and Houthi forces have the advantages of control of most of the regular Yemeni military units and their position in the mountainous western highlands of Yemen. The Saudi led coalition imposed an air and sea blockade of Yemen upon initiation of hostilities in March 2015, so only smuggled weapons and supplies can reach the forces of the Houthi and Saleh (Thompson 2015). Yet, the Houthi and Saleh forces have held their ground, in spite of absolute Saudi control of the air. Saudi planes continually pound the Houthi and Saleh forces, but to little avail. Saudi backed ground forces loyal to Hadi have made precious little headway in almost two years of war.

The United States

The Americans are caught between the need to assure the Saudis that the United States understand Saudi security concerns after the nuclear deal with Iran, and the fear that the Saudi military campaign is detrimental to Yemen's

stability (Stewart 2016). For the Saudis the central threat is Iran; for the Americans the central threat is al-Qaeda. The US wants a stable state in Yemen, regardless of who governs the state (Salisbury 2016, p. 9). In their initial expansion southward, Houthi forces relentlessly attacked al-Qaeda strongholds in al-Beidha and successfully dislodged al-Qaeda from the area (Salisbury 2014). Hadi's government tried to do the same, but failed. And though the Houthi parrot Iranian anti-Americanism, the Houthi have largely avoided direct confrontation with the Americans. The Americans could live with a Houthi dominated government. For the Saudis, al-Qaeda and Yemeni stability are secondary for the moment; their primary concern is Iran or a government hostile to Saudi interests (Abi-Habib and Al-Kibsi 2015).

A series of high profile bombing of civilian targets by Saudi planes in addition to a growing threat of widespread economic failure and famine pushed the Americans and British to put pressure on the warring parties in Yemen to come to a settlement (MacAskill and Torpey 2016). Talks in Kuwait in the summer of 2016 initially looked promising, but the core positions of the two sides did not shift at all. The Saudi-backed Hadi government sees, correctly, that the Houthi takeover of the government in Sana'a is a coup, but the Hadi side insists that the remedy to the conflict is the immediate reinstallation of the Hadi government in Sana'a and the disarming of Houthi militias. The Houthi side argues that it cannot disarm until a political settlement is reached. The Houthi cannot trust a government that waged war against it. In the eyes of the Houthi, only a new, national reconciliation government can oversee a military withdrawal of all forces and the creation of a new neutral military.

As the Kuwait talks stalled and the conflict resumed, US Secretary of State Kerry visited the area several times to push a plan for a political settlement. Kerry tried to reconcile the two conflicting positions by proposing parallel political and military tracks that would satisfy both the Hadi side's insistence on the disarmament of the Houthi forces, and the Houthi insistence on the priority of a political settlement (Al-Monitor 2016). Initially, both sides rejected Kerry's suggestions, but pressure from the British and Americans on the Saudis has forced the parties to reconsider. The Saudis have hinted that they are agreeable to the plan, a signal that a political settlement might actually be achievable now. Unfortunately, the war has inserted deep divisions of mistrust between Yemen's multiple centers of power, and Yemen may be *de facto* divided into mutually hostile camps that will have a difficult time forming an effective state. Yemen's faltering economy desperately requires sustained, well-coordinated efforts to rebuild a country devastated by war and facing a humanitarian crisis. Even with a political settlement, a stable and prosperous Yemen remains a long way off.

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